World Chronicle

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SECURITY OF UN STAFF MEMBERS

United Nations staff members and humanitarian workers have become moving targets. In the past two years, 40 civilian UN employees have died in the line of duty around the world. The number of abductions of UN staff is also on the increase. What can be done to protect these innocent unarmed victims? In this episode of **World Chronicle**, Benon Sevan, Security Coordinator of the United Nations, discusses what is being done to improve the security of international and local UN workers around the globe.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Abductions, detentions, injuries and deaths. United Nations staff worldwide are taking a heavy toll and are becoming targets in their own right. In the past few months alone, UN staff members and humanitarian workers in Burundi, Kosovo and East Timor have been killed. Kidnapping of UN staff is becoming a way of life in many parts of the world. Is working for the United Nations becoming one of the most dangerous jobs in the world?

Our guest today is an expert on security matters. He is Benon Sevan, United Nations' Security Coordinator. Joining me to talk with Mr. Sevan is Colum Lynch from *The Washington Post*.

Mr. Sevan, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

SEVAN: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sevan, these instances we've noted in the introduction seem to be quite widespread. Is there a common denominator? Is there some reason which is common to all these incidents that could account for what's happened?

SEVAN: Well, there's not--the nature of conflicts have changed also in the world. Today, as you know, wars are not taking place across the borders, but within borders, established borders of countries recognized by the United Nations. So, therefore, the nature of the conflict has changed; therefore, our working methods have not changed. So, therefore, we are sending now more and more staff members to areas where there is no government authority, there is no host government, because we used to be proud of saying--host government has the primary responsibility for security and safety of people. But when there are governments who don't even have the means to secure their own safety, how do you expect them to provide security to the United Nations staff? You take, for example, Somalia. There is no authority. There are war lords, if you want to call it, and yet we have staff going there, taking risks, with no security measures in place. And nobody is accountable for what they do to the staff members.

LITTLEJOHNS: So most of the incidents are carried out by rebel groups?

SEVAN: There are some rebel groups, and it depends also, I mean, the question, for example, I was recently in Angola in January when I was asked by the Secretary-

General to go to try to organize a rescue and search and rescue team, when one of our planes was shot down.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ah yes, I remember that.

SEVAN: And just as I was going to take off from New York I was told another plane was shut down. It's difficult to decide who is the one who shot it down. But the fact remains we lost a lot of colleagues. And then there's no accountability. We have been unable to even go for the second time to the press without some assistance. So there is a problem, and there is also a problem for the Organization. Sending people to very tough places in harm's way, and yet we don't provide sufficient protection for these people to carry on their jobs. So this is the reason why, I think, we have to find a way and at times to say no way, enough is enough.

LITTLEJOHNS: But what kind of protection can you provide? You can't send everybody out with a police escort, can you?

SEVAN: No. Working at the UN is a risk, always. It has become more risky now because before working for the UN gave you some kind of semblance at least of protection. People respect the UN flag, they respect a UN staff member, respect the Organization. What has happened now is that we are free game for everybody, for abductions, kidnapping, abuse. I am still having vivid images of these poor peacekeepers who were chained to the poles in Bosnia. And yet, the world did not shout, did not cry out over it. Very few, if anyone, has been persecuted for harming UN Staff Members. In fact, the Organization itself has begun becoming conscious only recently, these past two or three years, the necessity to do something about the security and safety of the staff, and training of the staff. Governments, Member States are very generous in passing resolutions. And yet we have one trust fund for training of the staff. What do we have? We have one million dollars contribution by Japan; 100,000 dollars by Norway; 3,000 dollars from Monaco, and 500 dollars from Senegal. That's all I have. And yet, we keep talking about -- for training of staff in--security--measures--

LITTLEJOHNS: Training staff so they would be –

SEVAN: Aware of–

LITTLEJOHNS: --security conscious.

SEVAN: Yes.

LYNCH: It seems that--that the UN is the one that seems to have a difficult time

saying no. You have a case like East Timor where I think there was an expectation that the UN Referendum would potentially be quite violent and the Security Council now wants the UN to go back into Angola. UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi said that he won't assure of providing any security guarantees. I mean, isn't this a perfect example of a place where you could–you or the Secretary-General could get in front of the microphone, in front of the Security Council and just say 'no, forget it, we're not going to do this.' We don't have a guarantee that our people can go into this situation with a high degree of security and safety; we're not going to do it until you come up with some sort of arrangement that gives us a greater sense of security when we go into these places.

SEVAN: We have a Secretary-General who is fully conscious of the security nets–risks taken by the staff because remember, he used to be a security coordinator himself previously, so therefore he's very aware of it. And it is of paramount importance for him – to secure those staff. The same applies also to the Deputy-Secretary-General who is Deputy Minister of Defence also – Miss Frechette – and she knows the UN system very well. In fact, there, you know, I would like to pay tribute to her for making a very valuable statement at the General Assembly the other day. And let's be frank about it. The Assembly was full house the other day, not because there was going to be a statement by her or by the General Assembly President in memory of the three staff members killed last week. No. The Assembly clearly was full because they were all there for the election of the Security Council members. Not because of the staff. The same, unfortunately, attitude is among the staff members also. Recently we had our memorial service, if you want to call, for staff; very few staff were present, maybe 50 or 60. What we are trying to do from my own office and together with the Deputy-Secretary-General, we are talking yesterday, to bring more and more consciousness about the situation, that we just cannot let people go without appropriate protection. Let's look at the budget. I have only six staff members at Headquarters, dealing with 188 different missions, not just peacekeeping operations. I have only 40 field security officers at the inter-agency level being financed, and 20 security officers financed directly by agencies and programmes. And when you think of over 50,000 staff members, it's nothing to have 60 security officers in the field. It's almost a caricature, I'm sorry to say. And yet, we have tried to manage it, and when I keep asking for money the first thing cut is always the security. You talk about Timor. We made a case before when they were planning initially. Yet, it was cut. Now we are trying to make a case again after the experience, particularly.

The same situation goes in Afghanistan. Who do I find accountable when one of our military advisors was shot dead, and we are still trying to find out what happened.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sevan how many people have actually been killed, how many have been abducted in the last year, for example?

SEVAN: Well, the last year this–this year we have about–luckily the numbers have gone down this year. Thirteen have been killed – staff members. And, as you know recently, about only a week ago, we had seven staff members in Georgia taken hostage. Fortunately, they were released.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about abductions and kidnappings?

SEVAN: A lot of kidnappings are taking place also for money purposes – in Georgia it happened, where they demand money. Or they tried to make a political statement, and therefore it's difficult to determine as to who is the one who's really doing the abduction. They want to make a political statement . And the other problem we have now more and more is what happens in Bosnia and Kosovo. We paid the price in Africa or somewhere else because UN is the symbol of actions taken. For example, now it's another problem. A typical case is Afghanistan again. So now I have to be on special alert because of what may happen to the UN staff members because we are in the front line. They are basically the symbols and people don't make distinction between staff members and governments who take actions. So, therefore, constantly we have to review the security situation.

LITTLEJOHNS: You served in Afghanistan. Were you conscious of security problems when you were there?

SEVAN: Oh yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Serious problems?

SEVAN: Very serious problems.

LITTLEJOHNS: Very serious problems.

SEVAN: I just happened to be lucky–that I survived.

LYNCH: In the kidnappings in Liberia, there were demands for money, fuel, food, that sort of thing. Is the UN willing to negotiate on those terms? Is the UN willing to provide a group of rebels with food, humanitarian assistance, the kinds of things that they want in exchange for hostages?

SEVAN: Well, we have, you know, adopted the policy at the ACC level that's

been–

LITTLEJOHNS: That's the Administrative Committee on Coordination.

SEVAN: Which is composed of all the executive heads of the programmes and the agencies and headed by the Secretary-General. The policy is not to pay any money because the moment you pay--you're going to get more and more staff members kidnapped. So, therefore, we should not pay.

LITTLEJOHNS: Have you not paid anybody?

SEVAN: I have not paid any single dollar.

LITTLEJOHNS: The–

SEVAN: Because, as you know, there were demands–

LYNCH: But there were arrangements in the peace accords in Sierra Leone where there is a recommendation to send a certain amount of humanitarian goods to one faction to sort of ensure that they are not starving and hungry and driven to steal food from local farms or to kidnap hostages. I mean, so there is some sort of bargaining that goes on at some level.

SEVAN: Well, I don't think that is different than what you were saying. I mean, for example, it's one thing to abduct a group of staff members and then say I need food, no. But even Angola where I was, you know, for example, we tried not to politicize with humanitarian assistance. We want to provide humanitarian assistance wherever we can reach, no matter which side of the border of the internal conflict one appears because people are people for us. The average person should be treated equally. So, therefore, children are children, irrespective of what their parents are doing. So, therefore, we have to provide humanitarian assistance irrespective of which side they are.

LITTLEJOHNS: The staff who go into the field, what kind of preparation do they have? There was a sad case in Kosovo where a guy from Queens here in New York City on his first day in Kosovo answered a question in Serbo-Croat that was asked by an Albanian, and for his pains was shot and killed. What can you do to prepare people for that situation?

SEVAN: This is the reason why I'm saying that we need more and more money to prepare everybody who goes to the field to have training.

LITTLEJOHNS: But why aren't you getting more money? You mentioned the paltry sums that you've received. Why aren't governments jumping on board?

SEVAN: Well, so far we've been campaigning. In two years that's all we got.

That's why I say they are very generous in providing resolutions, principles, but they don't when the chips are down we don't get the money. And, in fact, let's be frank about one thing. Governments are reluctant to send even their own military soldiers to areas where we are sending civilians. And the civilians are there before peacekeepers come, while the peacekeepers are there, and after the peacekeepers go away. Like in Somalia, for example, there was a peacekeeping operations. I had colleagues before the peacekeeping operations. After the peacekeepers were withdrawn we still have people working there.

LYNCH: It seems that governments don't pay a high political cost if one of their nationals is killed while working for the UN under a UN contract. But it seems that the only leverage that the UN really has to get countries to take this seriously is to tell them no, we're not going to do it, and it seems like that's something that the UN has been unable or willing to do, is to say no to the Security Council, we're not going to do it, you haven't given us the money, we're not safe.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sevan, before you respond to that. This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Benon Sevan, United Nations Security Coordinator.

SEVAN: Well, there is now more and more assertion by the Secretary-General side possible in the Security Council. I hate to use the word "demand" but to bring to the attention in a more vivid manner that we need money for the security of the staff. There is more and more recognition by governments also. You look at now what's going on regarding the draft resolution on Sierra Leone, recognition that you have to provide protection to humanitarian workers also. Remember, this big argument was going on in the Sixth Committee when they adopted this convention which was only applying to peacekeepers and not to the civilian staff. Now there is more and more acceptance that civilians are, in fact, more exposed to danger than the military guys.

LYNCH: If you were from a multinational company or an oil company in Angola or another place where there's a lot of danger, you hire an outside security firm, you hire Gurkhas – Nepalese Gurkhas – to protect your facility. Embassies do the same thing. Is there not a role for some of these sorts of groups? Why not hire a, you know, a group, a unit of Gurkhas to protect a WFP station in Somalia, that sort of thing? Has that been given much thought?

SEVAN: The question is before you reach that point you have to get the money. And private companies are far more expensive because there are some agencies who have

hired people from these companies on an individual basis. They pay very high commissions to the agency which is making their staff available to the UN agency, and not necessarily they are much better than us. If I have the money we can do the job better. Because it has to be a UN command, if you want to call it a command, in order to keep its pure United Nations nature.

LITTLEJOHNS: Have these incidents resulted in a reluctance on the part of UN staff to volunteer for field service?

SEVAN: No, and I admire my colleagues. In fact, there is more and more voluntary nature of those who are going. In fact, I don't think anybody has been forced to go to any mission, which, in fact is under the rules – you should go irrespective of whether you like it or not. There are enough volunteers who are prepared to go. So, therefore, from that point of view, I think everybody – the world has to admire the dedication and the commitment of staff members. What we are asking is very little in return. Likewise, governments should feel committed to provide sufficient funds for the staff members. We have been able to train only so far 1,000 general staff members only. We are very proud of the training we have given to 20 or so middle level officials for hostage negotiations purposes. And I'm very proud that we have managed in the past year to have the release of all the hostages taken by our trainees. In fact, in two instances in Somalia governments have asked to use our – to utilize our hostage negotiators to negotiate the release of those who have been kidnapped. So, therefore, in terms of return for the money, we are doing a very good job. Next week, in fact, we have yet one more group of 20 people to be trained for hostage negotiations. And also what we are doing is training also people for stress management. Something also–the UN has come up about it very little at this stage because we evacuate people and we don't send enough people to look at these people, like the trauma when they went–when we evacuated from Rwanda; the trauma when we have evacuated people from East Timor.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean the trauma from having been exposed to genocide–

SEVAN: Yes, and–yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Having observed these terrible things that happened – the traumatic effect of the–

SEVAN: Yes. So therefore we are sending the stress management experts.

LYNCH: Do you talk about the difficulty in getting resources that you'd need to

protect people? Have you or has the Organization sort of looked inside itself and said maybe we're not doing a good job of protecting our own people, maybe there's a better way we can do it, given the fact that, you know, we're not getting the money we've been asking for day in and day out?

SEVAN: See, what we have been pushing for is that for every programme or activity there should be a separate entry for security, for the budget purposes, because when you look at peacekeeping, other than humanitarian activities, there is very little money, if any, put there. When we make concerted appeal for humanitarian assistance, we should have a separate column for governments to provide funds for the security of humanitarian workers also because we lose more money by sending people in and out. You take Afghanistan again. We spent more money paying staff at evacuation status than the money that's going to be utilized for the purpose of security officers. I have only, after a big fight, five field security officers in Afghanistan. That's all I have. When you think the territory, the nature of the terror, the nature of the fighting going on, what are five security officers? Nothing! And you were talking about private companies. No private sector will send anybody to the field with that type of budget. It's not even a shoestring – and we have the strings but no shoes even.

LITTLEJOHNS: What kind of compensation do the families of these unfortunate victims receive?

SEVAN: I hate to say it. Even that came so late. When I was in Afghanistan, I hate to come back again, there was no insurance for a staff member being killed in the service of the United Nations. Only recently came about, and the maximum payment is 250,000 dollars, that's all, which is absolutely unacceptable. Even for that, we had tremendous difficulties in trying to finance it, you know.

LITTLEJOHNS: In the case of Rwanda which you've mentioned, some peacekeepers were killed. Were the culprits ever called to account?

SEVAN: I'm not aware of it. To the best of my knowledge, though, I think the Deputy Secretary-General made the point also--I think only one case so far somebody has been prosecuted for taking UN staff who are otherwise forgotten and, as I said also, in some countries there is no authority to be accountable for it. We have this recent case in Burundi. I have just sent investigators to look into it. I don't know what they are going to come up with. We don't know who did it, which side did it. I have this case in Northern Iraq where

somebody was shot dead point blank after being asked to give water and the poor guy gave water, and when he came back, this guy with an empty bottle and he shot the guy. And I'm still trying--so--the worst part, of course, for me is--how do you face the families of these people? What do you say? What do you say to these people--to the families of those who got killed in the shooting down of those two planes in Angola? What do you tell them? When you go to the site and you see nothing but ashes, like cigar ashes, I'm sorry to say. What do you do? It's awful. This is why I think they're trying from my Office and with the Deputy Secretary General, we discussed the other day, we intend to make a big pitch to try to raise funding, and above all, awareness. Last week, I hate to say it, I hate to say that something terrible has to happen in order to get things done. Last week was a typical week where we had everything happening in one go. Within 24 hours three of my colleagues were killed, point blank, and seven taken hostages. What else do we have to show to the world to prove that it is dangerous to work for the UN in these areas?

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sevan, you've several times mentioned the Deputy Secretary-General, Louise Frechette, who was Ambassador of Canada at one time in the UN. What is her involvement in this?

SEVAN: Well, you know, she is more as responsible overall on the humanitarian side also of the activities. So, therefore, I work with her very closely. Also of course in my capacity as Security Coordinator, I report to the Secretary-General also at the same time. So, therefore, we are trying to see how we can mobilize both at the agency level, the UN system level, and also the governmental level, to bring, as I said, more awareness of the dangers so that when decisions are taken to send the staff members to the field, it is done consciously with the appropriate protection to the staff. I'm not saying that we'll be risk free. We always take risks. I take risks even walking across the road, the street in New York. I'm not talking about this type of risk. But when we know the situation is bad, I think we should be able to say enough is enough.

LYNCH: How does the United Nations investigate a crime against one of its civil servants? In Iraq, in Kosovo where two UN workers were killed, can you call on the FBI? Will they help? Can you call another foreign governments to help in the investigation? You have one or two guys showing up and having a look around? I mean, how extensive is the crime investigation?

SEVAN: We send our own investigators. It happened in Tajikistan. We also

sometimes when necessary ask for assistance from some governments to provide us assistance, just as I ask sometimes assistance from, for example, Canada I ask assistance, when we send stress management experts to Rwanda. So, therefore, we count on governments to assist us, what I would call in kind contributions for the purpose of training of hostage. For example, we ask some governments who have good experience in these matters to help us in training our staff. And it has been very useful.

LYNCH: But in terms of nabbing a criminal, it's a zero success rate. No one's ever--

SEVAN: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Which country would you say has created the biggest problems? Which operation has had the most casualties?

SEVAN: It's hard to say, but of course, it depends which month you're speaking. We have also--remember one thing, when we count casualties we also count local staff also. Of course, there we are getting more and more pressure by a certain staff associations also. As you know, under the security regulations, we evacuate international staff, and on rare occasions we also evacuate local staff in the event that our association with the United Nations poses a danger to their security and safety, which happened in the case of – recently in East Timor. So, therefore, we evacuated local staff of the UN, together with their families, to Darwin, just as we also evacuated--it is unusual--those who had sought refuge, local East Timorese into the UN compound. We also took them. And thanks to those certain governments, I mean, they were very helpful in making all those arrangements because, you know, we have to count also on governments to provide the logistics. And what we do, of course, is that for the purpose of evacuation some governments ask us – it happened in Zaire and also in Congo Brazil also, when we evacuated also their nationals. We also evacuated other organization staff, such as IGO's and Non-Governmental Organizations. We have tried to also come to some kind of an agreement signed protocols with some inter-governmental bodies such as IMO, International Migration Organization. Therefore, they fall under our security umbrella, and therefore we evacuate them also in the event they are there. And we, you know, share the cost of evacuation pro rata.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sevan, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.**

Our guest has been Benon Sevan, the United Nations Security Coordinator. He was

interviewed by Colum Lynch of *The Washington Post*. I am Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827, New York, New York, 10017.

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